

DENGKI G's

VOLUME EIGHT!!

08

NOVEL



ガーリッシュ
ナンバー

著：渡航 キャラクター原案・挿絵：QP:flapper
補絵：やむ系

アウトロー・
ワンダーランド

原案：田中ロミオ
キャラクター原案・挿絵：saitom 著：渡航

SILENTWORLD

著：ごう イラスト：空中幼彩

乃木若葉は 勇者である

企画原案・シリーズ構成：タカヒロ（みなとそふと）

執筆：朱白あおい イラスト：BUNBUN

監修：Project 2H




Maybe... No, it has to be.

...No, I'm sure of it!

There have to be other survivors besides us.

That just has to be the case.

For example, there seems to be high hopes for .

We've gotta keep working at it, for their sake too.

Hero Record Feb 2019 AD

Takashima Yuuna's Record

第八話

灯花

企画原案・シリーズ構成／

タカヒロ (みなとそふと)

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パーティックスデザイン／

D.K&JW WORKS

監修／Project 2H

vol.8

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乃木若葉は
勇者である

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Chapter 8 - Petals of Light

As a calm air drifted in their midst, the girls clad in white bathed in the waterfall.

Uesato Hinata was among them. Her long black hair and her white outfit clung to her wet skin. The exposure to the waterfall caused her flesh to flush faintly.

They were in a place near the 'Shinju', the centerpiece of Shikoku's protection. The girls bathing in the waterfall were the miko who were chosen by the gods and could hear their voice. They were currently cleansing their bodies in order to meet with the Shinju.

The midwinter air cooled the waterfall, causing a prickling pain in the girls' skin. They required strict discipline in order to keep their focus in light of that pain, but it was nonetheless imperative that they cleanse their bodies before they met the Shinju, as it was god itself.

- "Purify us, cleanse us, oh gods, protect us, bless us"

Hinata repeatedly recited that chant in her head with its peculiar rhythm. It was apparently a type of norito, or traditional Shinto prayer.

Since Hinata was not raised in a particularly Shinto family, she did not originally have any knowledge of rituals. Since she was bestowed with the public duty a miko entailed, people at the Taisha [TL: Grand Shrine] had taught her various mannerisms.

Many of the miko had been born in ordinary households without any connection to the Shinto priesthood or shrines, but a few girls did come from families of Shinto priests. According to those girls, the norito and mannerisms that the Taisha had taught the miko were only scratched the surface of those used in Shinto rituals.

'Since many of the girls originally had nothing to do with Shinto rituals, they're trying to minimize what they have to learn' -- That initial impression appeared to be incorrect. At one point, a girl from a family of Shinto priests nonchalantly tried to recite a norito that the Taisha did not teach. Upon hearing her, a member of the Taisha put on a stern face and admonished her, saying that it was 'inappropriate here'.

Those mannerisms and norito were not 'untaught'. They were 'forbidden'.

Ever since the appearance of the Vertexes, Shinto rituals had gradually begun to change.

And perhaps they would keep on changing.

Once the waterfall mediation was over and the girls had gotten out from the river, miko clothes were prepared for them.

- "Aww man, I thought I was a goner! It's so cold! And it hurts! It's the middle of winter and you expect us to meditate under a waterfall, Shinju-samaaa...?"

Aki Masuzu clamored in misery as she changed clothes. She was another miko, one year older than Hinata. Despite their age difference, the two of them got along surprisingly well.

As Aki wiped her braided hair, she spoke to Hinata in a discontented voice.

- "Mmm, anyway, Uesato-chan, I'm surprised you can take on waterfall meditation like it's nothing."

- "? Why's that?"

- "I mean you normally don't do this sort of ceremony, do you?"

Since Hinata was a miko closely associated with the heroes, she normally lived in Marugame Castle alongside them. Thus, she rarely had a direct audience with the Shinju and so this would be her first experience with winter waterfall meditation. In contrast, Aki and the other girls normally spent their time at the Taisha, and since they were near the Shinju every day, waterfall meditation was an everyday occurrence for them.

- "But look at me! I never get used to it no matter how many times I do it! There has to be some sort of physical reason... I guess it's gotta be all that boob blubber??"

Aki smirked at Hinata.

- "Wh-what are you trying to say...?"

- "That mass of blubber concentrated in your chest area's gotta be insulating your heart from any obstructions. That's why you're so resilient to the cold. And I get the feeling you've been growing even more lately!"

- "...!"

That comment caused Hinata to cover her chest in a panic.

- "Ahahah. That's a good thing. Boobs are a girl's greatest weapon."

Though she had often experienced breast envy coming from Tamako and other girls, Hinata often thought that slender frames like Wakaba's were more beautiful than her own.

Hinata wiped her body and changed clothes.

- "But I don't think waterfall meditation is really all that harsh. Sure, the water did feel piercing cold... but oddly enough, I felt a little bit of warmth."

- "You might have an extra helping of divine protection, Uesato-chan. I mean, the Shinju-sama does like you the best, after all."

Hinata apparently had the highest aptitude as a miko among all the people at the Taisha. The reason she was called back to the Taisha was also perhaps out of a need for Hinata's high ability level since they had received an important oracle.

- "By the way, Uesato-chan?"

- "Yes?"



Aki hesitated to ask her question as she looked for her words.

"Umm~... Are those girls, well... are they doing okay?"

"Those girls' referred to Tamako and Anzu.

"They're doing well. Tamako-san's so energetic that Anzu-san's getting tired out trying to pull the brakes on her. But Anzu-san's enjoying it too. Those two get along well, after all."

"That's fine, I guess. I mean, they -are- heroes, so of course they can handle themselves."

Aki spoke bluntly, sounding considerably disinterested.

"Aki-san, you really do worry about Tamako-san and Anzu-san, huh?"

Aki came from Ehime prefecture-- right by where Tamako and Anzu had lived. On the day the Vertexes appeared, she had met with Tamako right after gaining her miko powers. It was Aki who had told Tamako of Anzu's location and told her to save her.

Afterwards, the three of them worked together until they reached the protective care of the Taisha. Ever since then, Aki had always been worried about Tamako and Anzu.

"It's not like I'm worried about them or anything. I was just thinking that those two are such polar opposites and they're so childish that they might be a nuisance to everyone around them. Look, I was the miko that guided them at one point, so I feel a little responsible for them. But just a teensy bit."

Aki's long-winded explanation made it undeniable that she was worried about them in the end. But perhaps she had yet to realize it herself.

Hinata took out her smartphone from her personal belongings and showed the pictures on it to Aki. Among the collection were pictures of Tamako and Anzu.

After she had seen them, Aki's face visibly relaxed in relief.

"Oh. They look like they don't have a care in the world. They're perfectly fine then. It was a waste to worry about them."

So you were worried after all-- Hinata thought about pointing that out, but decided against it since it would be in poor taste.

Though Aki had relaxed her face, she then quickly furrowed her eyebrows.

"Anyway, Uesato-chan..."

"Yes?"

"... You've got way too many pictures of Nogi-chan. This folder's mostly nothing but pictures of her."

"That's because it's my life's work."

Hinata puffed up her chest in pride.

After the waterfall meditation, the miko walked in a single file line to the place where the Shinju was enshrined. From the area's circumference, they could hear something that sounded like a low, monotonous song.

--IN DAYS OF OLD, WHEN THIS LAND WAS BARREN AND THE... HALF-LEAF ALSO OFTEN VIOLENTLY... HE HAD FULLY WOVEN THE... KUNITSUKURI OHOANAMUCHI [THE LAND CREATOR]... THEN THE ASHIHARA [THE REED PLAINS--

If they looked around, they could see people wearing unmarked white garments standing in the shade of the trees surrounding the area, reciting a norito. Their chanting voices shrouded the entire place, making it seem as if it were a spirit realm.

That said, this was the heart of Shikoku, the location of the Shinju, which was god itself. It was unmistakably a 'spirit world'.

--THE DWELLING PLACE OF... LIKE AN ENDLESS, TORTUROUS ROPE... OVER ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY INTERTWINED... ITS BOARDS WIDE AND SPACIOUS... DRED AND EIGHTY SHIELDS STITCHED....--

As they walked the undeveloped path, Hinata thought about her friends back at Marugame Castle.

She wondered if Wakaba was able to get back on her feet.

She wondered if the heroes were able to get back on their feet from the hardships they faced.

She wondered if Yuuna was able to recover from her serious injuries.

Even though only a day had passed since she had left Marugame Castle, she couldn't get those girls off her mind.

-(I can't believe I'm this upset after just one day...)

In contrast, Aki hadn't seen Anzu or Tamako for over a year.

Many of the miko had to have been living far away from their family, friends, and loved ones as well.

If just a single day had been this tough on Hinata, then how hard must it have been on those other girls?

--IF THE SACHITAMA [THE PROPITIOUS SPIRITS] AND THE KUSHIKIMITAMA [THE MIRACULOUS SPIRITS]... THAT SHINE THE DIVINE LIGHT... APPEASE THE... THEN THE OHOKUNITAMA NO KAMI....--



"Hey."

Aki whispered to Hinata from behind.

"The Taisha people will get mad if you talk, you know."

"They're probably too busy chanting their norito to even notice us. I'm sure the Shinju-sama won't mind either, as long as we don't make too much of a fuss. How could he stay mad at such cute miko like us just for talking a little bit when we gallantly work our butts off all the time to serve him?"

"Praising your own cuteness and gallantry just diminishes both, you know..."

Aki disregarded Hinata's exasperation and continued talking.

"Did you know that contact with Suwa City has ceased?"

"... Yes, I know. Wakaba-chan was the one contacting Suwa after all."

Similarly to Shikoku, Suwa had also formed a barrier through the power of the gods. A hero named Shiratori had been opposing the Vertex invasion there. However, all communications with Suwa had ceased after last September.

That did not mean Suwa's destruction was 100% confirmed. However, there was probably... little possibility that people had survived there.

"I see, so you knew about Suwa then, huh. Then did you know that they found a place where there could be other survivors?"

"! Where?"

Hinata shouted without thinking... but the people chanting the norito did not seem to notice.

"It hasn't been confirmed yet, and they don't know exactly where the place is, but apparently... there have been faint survivor responses in the mainland to the north and various islands to the southwest."

"... I see."

She could feel hope gushing forth from her heart.

People survived in other places besides Shikoku. Humanity isn't over yet. It has yet to be defeated. Wakaba and the others would surely be happy to hear about it once she got back.

"We haven't found any, but it's possible there are surviving areas in Honshu. Suwa hasn't necessarily been destroyed either, you know?"

"Yes, that is true."

All they knew was that communications with Suwa had ceased. That could perhaps simply be due to machinery failure or disconnection of the communications line.

There was still hope.

--THE IMPERIAL THRONE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH... THE COMMONERS... THOSE PEOPLE... WITHOUT VARIOUS CALAMITIES... GUARDING THROUGH THE NIGHT, GUARDING THROUGH THE DAY--

"Say, Uesato-chan... Humanity sure is strong, huh."

"Yes, it truly is..."

Over the long course of its history, humanity had confronted countless calamities. And each time, humanity came to a halt and shed tears. But in the end, humanity would stand back up with its own power and recover.

"I'm sure humanity will stand back up once more. We can reclaim our world."

"Yes, I believe so too."

Believe. Wish. Pray.

That was all the miko could do as they had no battle power of their own.

"And, well, once we reclaim our world... I can play with Tamako and Anzu-chan without anyone having to worry about anything like miko and heroes. I can see my mom every day. And I've got a little brother too. He's such a brat, but he's cute. Right now... he's hospitalized due to "uranophobia", but I'm sure he'll get better once the world's back to normal..."

Hinata decided not to look at Aki's face as she spoke. She could tell she was crying from her hoarse voice alone.

Hinata had often imagined.

If this world were at peace...

If this world returned to normal...

The girls fighting as heroes and the girls living cloistered lives as miko could live entirely different lives.

They could work up a sweat in club activities after school. They could wrack their brains studying for tests. They could chat in family restaurants until the sun went down and get scolded by their mothers when they got back home late. Maybe some girls could even fall in love with boys and live for romance.

Ordinary, common, yet warm, precious lives.

--WE OBEY... SHEDDING TEARS... UNDER CALM RECONSIDERATION OF KANNAWOBI [DIVINE RENEWAL GOD]... SAWOSHIKA'S EAR...AND GOVERN...--

-(We'll return to those days... for sure.)



Hinata swore resolutely upon her heart.

Finally, the Shinju appeared at the end of the path.

That tree made its appearance in Shikoku after the Vertex invasion of 2015. It is enshrined by the Taisha and said to be god itself.

The Shinju bestows the miko with oracles, and the heroes with the power to fight. The establishment of the barrier around Shikoku, as well as the phenomenon of Forestization are both said to be the Shinju's doing.

The Shinju doesn't merely provide oracles, hero power, and Shikoku's protection. It has an effect on biology. Heroes mobilize with the fusion of the Shinju's power and the power of humans, but examination of the heroes' bodies has apparently led to rapid advancements in the research of cell biology and human physiology.

Hinata's body tensed up as she stood before the Shinju.

Despite having been talking up to that point, Aki had shut her lips tight as well.

Dozens of adults were lined on both sides from the Shinju to the miko, genuflecting on both hands and knees with their heads down. They were forming a passage for the miko to walk towards the Shinju. Their faces were all tensed.

The ones bowing their heads and the ones chanting the norito were all members of the Taisha.

The members comprising the Taisha were qualified priests from all shrines. Being polytheistic, though their enshrined deities were distinct, they each made up one single "Taisha". The Shinju's overwhelming presence was the impetus that allowed that to happen.

The miko passed through the passage formed by the Taisha people toward the Shinju, with Hinata leading the group.

Once Hinata was face to face with the Shinju, she instinctively knelt and bowed her head.

-(You often hear about it in legends... but humans cannot stand before gods. It really is true--)

After bowing her head once, she was able to relax as if she had been given some sort of reprieve.

Hinata touched the Shinju's trunk with her hand.

It felt mysteriously warm. As if she were touching a living being.

-(The Shinju-sama-- is alive...)

The next moment, Hinata's body became warm and she felt as if something were flowing into her through her hand contact with the Shinju.

-"...Mmgh"

The warmth in her body eventually concentrated into her head and she felt feverishly groggy. She lost her sense of balance, her senses dulled, and her sight grew dark and narrow--

- "Uesato-chan!? What's going on--"

- "Uesato-sama!"

- "Not good. Her pupils are dilating--"

She could hear voices. But those voices faded into the distance one by one.

Eventually, Hinata's consciousness became fully submerged into the darkness.

When she woke up, Hinata found herself lying down in a futon. She was apparently in one of the shrine's rooms. Aki and several other miko were sitting by the futon's side, watching over her.

- "You're awake! Thank goodness..."

Hinata looked to see a relieved Aki.

- "Uesato-chan, has your consciousness cleared up? Do you know who I am?"

- "Yes... I'm okay, Aki-san."

As she spoke, Hinata's face went pale white. She shivered as if she were freezing.

- "Uesato-chan? What's wrong? You're shivering."

- "The oracle..."

- "--What did you see?"

Aki peered into Hinata's eyes with a serious expression on her face.

- "Countless little stars filled the dark sky... And then fell like meteors... Several of the small stars combined into a brilliance unlike anything I've ever seen..."

As soon as they heard Hinata's words, Aki instructed the surrounding miko to inform the Taisha people. Several miko nodded and left the room on quick feet.

Hinata understood the meaning of the imagery the Shinju had conveyed to her.

- "... There's going to be a general offensive before too long. The number of invading Vertexes will far surpass anything we've ever seen before..."



The next day, Hinata returned to Marugame Castle. She was tasked with informing the heroes about the oracle and working out preparations for the next invasion.

When Hinata entered her dormitory room in Marugame Castle, she saw Wakaba sitting there in formal seiza position.

- "Hinata, I want to thank you."

Her expression was overly serious as usual, but something about her tone of voice made it sound like a load had been taken off her shoulders. Her eyes were shining with a light that showed she had found her way.

Wakaba told Hinata about what happened after she had left Marugame Castle.

How Wakaba had noticed her own weaknesses, settled things out with their friends, and promised never to be reckless again--

- "... That's great, Wakaba-chan..."

- "Yeah. It's because you believed in me and watched over me that I learned of my own weakness in the truest sense. Thank you, Hinata..."

Wakaba had found out her own weakness and overcome it on her own, just as Hinata believed she would.

- "I knew you could do it, Wakaba-chan. I'm proud to be your childhood friend."

She smiled. She strongly felt that Wakaba would now be able to stand up to whatever battles would come her way from now on.

Hinata gazed directly at Wakaba's face.

- "Wakaba-chan. There's something I need to tell all of the heroes."

Hinata told the heroes about the Vertexes' impending general offensive. Since the invasion would be more severe than anything they faced before, the reality of the word "death" weighed heavily upon the heroes.

That said, they were by no means pessimistic. Perhaps Wakaba's emotional growth had an effect on the others as well.

Hinata then told the heroes about the possibility of human survival in places other than Shikoku.

They had found hope. The heroes all felt that they couldn't let Shikoku be destroyed. For Shikoku's sake, and for the sake of the survivors in other areas as well.

As Hinata looked at them, she thought to herself--

Once the battle began, she'd have no power at all by herself.

So she prayed.

That they would all return safe and sound.

After hearing about the Vertexes' full-scale attack, Wakaba thought about what she needed to do.

-(I need to face everyone as leader again...)

And what she came up with was that she needed to build up mutual understanding among all the heroes. She couldn't fight all by herself. If they failed to reach an understanding on the battlefield, then they'd be unable to demonstrate their powers to the fullest extent.

If all the heroes understood each other's thoughts and personalities, then they could minimize any hesitation and friction after the battle commenced. And then everyone would likely be able to demonstrate their powers to the fullest extent.

And thus, Wakaba decided that she should talk with all of the heroes.

It didn't matter what they talked about. As long as they communicated, it should help them understand each other.

-"The biggest problem is if the enemy splits up into several groups and attacks separately like they did before, huh. The bigger the Vertexes' numbers, the more possible that becomes."

"Mhmm, mhmm..."

Wakaba and Anzu discussed strategy over a map of the Kagawa area.

Though Anzu wasn't as effective as the other heroes in melee combat, she was the best among the heroes in terms of knowledge and clever exploitation of enemy weaknesses. Wakaba held a strategy meeting with her, thinking that perhaps she could come up with some good ideas for the upcoming large-scale battle.

-"But there's nothing we can do about the Vertexes' overwhelming advantage in numbers... Hmm..."

Anzu pondered as she looked at the map.

Her eagerness to think made her look very promising to Wakaba.

-"Thanks, Anzu."

Wakaba calmly said that.

-"What's this all of a sudden?"

Anzu looked at Wakaba, slightly confused.

-"You called out to me when I was down, Anzu. Back then-- I felt really helpless."

And with that, Wakaba embraced Anzu.



"I was beginning to lose faith in myself and Hinata wasn't there to support me. I'm... really glad you talked with me, Anzu."

Anzu smiled gently as Wakaba admitted to her own weaknesses.

"... Wakaba-san, you're more of a little puppy than you appear to be at first glance. I can tell why Hinata-san likes taking care of you so much now."

"...!"

Wakaba's face turned red, but she still found Anzu's gentle tone of voice pleasant.

"--Oh, I know!"

Anzu nodded as if she had remembered something.

"Wakaba-san, if all the heroes gather around you, we might be able to pull off a fighting style we haven't done before."

"What kind of style...?"

"We'll use battle formations. After wars became centered on guerrilla tactics, battle formations started to see use only in sports, but military history shows several instances of battles being won because of them."

Wakaba and Anzu looked back over the map and continued their strategy meeting.

On another day--

Wakaba and Tamako went to "Ichikame", a famous local honetsukidori restaurant. Honetsukidori is a chicken leg roasted with the bone still in, a gourmet cuisine local to Marugame City. The dish is beloved in not just Marugame, but all over Kagawa Prefecture as well.

Since Wakaba and Tamako had gained a high degree of popularity as heroes, the other customers kept glancing at them, but it was no problem as long as they paid it no heed.

Wakaba and Tamako held up the honetsukidori with a napkin wrapped around the bone part as they sank their teeth into the steamy flesh.

An aromatic scent tickled their nostrils. The meat juices and special sauce intertwined with the chicken leg flesh, giving birth to an exquisite flavor.

"Delicious!"

"Honetsukidori's definitely the way to go for chicken meat. It goes well with the rice too."

Wakaba alternated bites of honetsukidori with rice while Tamako wholeheartedly went for the honetsukidori only.

- "And 'chick' meat is definitely the way to go for honetsukidori! It's way better than 'hen' meat!"

There are two kinds of honetsukidori. "Chick" uses spring chickens while "hen" uses more mature chicken meat. "Chick" is more plump, tender, and easier to eat, while "hen" has a deeper flavor that oozes out the more you chew on its tougher meat.

- "Hold on. I can't just let you say that as if it were fact, Tamako. The true deliciousness of honetsukidori lies in the 'hen' meat. True, 'chick' meat is easier to eat and thus preferred by many people, but 'hen' meat is its true form..."

- "Mmmgh! That's not true at all! Easier to eat means it's more delicious, obviously. The 'chick' meat that you can just keep digging into is the true form..."

Wakaba's piercing line of sight crossed with Tamako's.

The chick camp and hen camp of the honetsukidori faithful would often clash.

Starting with Tamako, the two girls stood up, honetsukidori still in hand.

- "Wakaba... looks like there can only be one."

- "You stole the words right out of my mouth. 'Chick' or 'Hen'? Let's see which one remains vic--"

Just then, as if to interrupt Wakaba, she felt something tugging at her clothes.

When she looked down, she saw a small girl pulling at the cuff of her sleeve.

- "Ms. Hero, please don't fight. All honetsukidori is yummy!"

- " ... " ... "

Wakaba and Tamako were at a loss for words. They blushed and sat back down in their chairs.

The girl's mother, who was sitting at a nearby table apologized for her daughter's rudeness towards the honorable heroes, but Wakaba and Tamako felt more like they were the ones who had to apologize.

As they returned to eating, Wakaba and Tamako calmed down and talked again.

- "That girl's right. 'Chick' meat and 'hen' meat both have their good points. They're both delicious."

- "Yeah. It's great to have such variety!"

Similarly the two heroes had their own variety.

Wakaba had a serious disposition, while Tamako was an energetic type. They both had their good points.

- "Okay, then I'm done with this 'chick' meat here! Eat some of this and get it into your tama-tummy!"

- "Sure. In that case, take this 'hen' meat, then..."

Wakaba and Tamako exchanged some of their honetsukidori and ate them together.



On yet another day--

Wakaba visited Chikage's room.

"Chikage, let's play games!"

"...?"

Chikage was caught off guard by the sudden proposal.

Wakaba held out a portable game console and game in front of Chikage. The game was a newly released title from a popular series. Though it was a fantasy game, it wasn't one of the variety of heroes fighting demon lords, but rather an action game with the goal of finding various kinds of monsters and hunting them.

"I only recently started playing this game, but it can be played co-op, right? I heard co-op's the real meat of the game."

"...ph."

Chikage smiled.

Of course, Chikage owned the same game Wakaba held out. And she was really into it. She had raised her player character considerably and her equipment and stats were of the highest rank.

-(She's only just recently jumped on the bandwagon... And she wants to play co-op with my player character-- "C Shadow"? ... I'll show her the difference in our abilities...!)

Chikage took out her own portable game console.

They established the wireless connection and their characters appeared on the same field.

"I started out thinking it'd be just a time waster, but it's a lot more interesting than I thought it'd be. I'm addicted now. I've been playing solo up until now, but I came across an enemy I just couldn't beat... So I was thinking you could help me if you were playing this game too, Chikage."

The monster that Wakaba was having difficulty with was said to be the most difficult enemy of the early stages of the game.

Chikage and Wakaba stood up against that monster together.

"... You've really changed, haven't you..."

Chikage muttered as she operated her game console.

"Hmm? Did you say something?"

Chikage shook her head at Wakaba's puzzled question.

"No... It's nothing..."



Before Wakaba had changed, she probably would have kept on playing solo to beat the monster without making any progress. But now, she was able to trust in other people and ask for help.

And even in the game, Wakaba was able to keep up pace with Chikage in battle. She wasn't carelessly rushing in on her own, but rather playing a support role to help the strong Chikage, and only going in for vital, precise attacks. Chikage was able to play a more pleasant game than when she was playing solo.

- "I thought about it back at the onsen visit too, but... you really have a talent for games..."

- "Really? That's actually reassuring coming from you, Chikage."

- "You should really... foster that talent. I'll lend you some games I recommend... You can start out with these twenty or so games suitable for beginners..."

- "T-twenty!? And those are just the ones for beginners!?"

- "Heheh..."

At another time--

Wakaba visited Yuuna's hospital room to see how she was doing.

As soon as Wakaba entered, a bright voice greeted her.

- "Wakaba-chan! It looks like I can finally leave the hospital!"

Yuuna got out of bed and stood on the floor. She had taken off her bandages to show that her injuries were pretty much all gone. Was her surprisingly quick recovery due to her own merits, or due to the blessings of the Shinju?

- "I've been out of practice for so long, so once I get back to school, I gotta train hard!"

Yuuna took a kempo stance as she said that.

Wakaba smiled wryly upon seeing Yuuna's overflowing energy.

- "Try not to push yourself, though. You've only just finished recovering. Now then..."

Though she had come to talk with Yuuna, Wakaba didn't think of what to talk about.

Hobbies?

Martial arts?

Favorite foods?

She felt a little indecisive now.

- "... Yuuna, is there anything you'd like to do?"

Wakaba asked in a fit of desperation.

- "Huh? What's this all of a sudden?"

- "Ahhh, well, I thought I'd do something to celebrate your discharge, that's all! Anything at all."

- "Hmm... Then... I guess I'd like to clean your ears."

Yuuna said so as she gently touched Wakaba's ear.

- "Clean my ears?"

- "Yeah! Hina-chan said 'Wakaba-chan's weakness is ear cleaning', so I've always wanted to try doing it for you."

- "..."

Dammit, Hinata. Why'd you have to go and say that-- Wakaba thought, but it really wasn't that big a deal to let her clean her ears. It might give her a good opportunity to hold a conversation, after all.

- "Okay. If it's just cleaning my ears, that's fine."

- "Yay! Then lie down on my bed."

Wakaba lay down and rested her head on Yuuna's lap.

- "Okay, then here we gooo!"

- "Yeah."

Yuuna brought a cotton swab into Wakaba's ear.

-(Now then, what should I talk with Yuuna about...?)

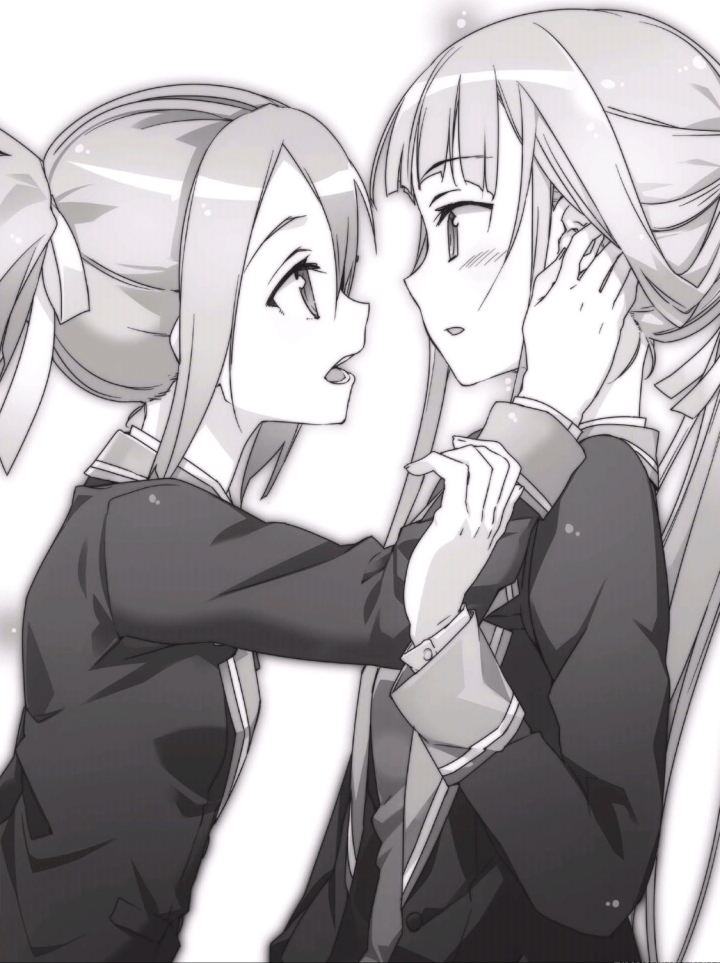
Right as that thought crossed Wakaba's mind.

- "!!?"

A pleasant sensation wrapped itself around Wakaba's entire body, as if each and every one of her nerves relaxed at the same time. All Yuuna was doing was cheerfully humming as she cleaned Wakaba's ears-- but not even Hinata was a match for a technique like that.

- "...!!!"

Wakaba tried searching for a topic to talk about-- but she had no composure to think at all.



The heroes spent their time together as their feelings mixed and mingled.

The fierce battle foretold in the oracle in the midst of the war of humanity's last stand would later be called "The Battle of Marugame Castle".

The girls would stake their lives to protect the last glimmer of hope--

(Chapter 8 End)